

Town of Chester Budget Committee Public Hearing
January 8, 2024
Approved Minutes
7:00 PM

Budget Committee members present:

Ephraim Dobbins
Kathy Guilmette
Charlotte Lister
Beth Swanson
Rob Varsalone
Sabrina Harris, Chester School Board Ex-Officio

Budget Committee members absent:

Jack Cannon
Ron McKinnon
Steve Couture, Selectboard Liaison

Guests present:

Royal Richardson, Chester School Board Chairman
Sharon Locke, SAU Superintendent
Benjamin Kilar, SAU Finance Manager
Chester PACT

I. Meeting to Order

Mr. Dobbins called the meeting to order.

II. Attendance

III. Announcements by the Chair – Welcome

IV. Public Comment

There were no members of the public wishing to comment.

V. Board of Selectmen Update

Mr. Couture was not present, so there was no Board of Selectmen update.

VI. School Board Budget Presentation

Chester School Board Chair Royal Richardson, SAU Superintendent Sharon Locke, and SAU Finance Manager Ben Kilar presented the proposed 2024-25 School budget.

Ms. Swanson requested the Chester School Board (CSB) provide backup to help her understand why it makes sense financially for Chester to remain a single SAU versus exploring joining another SAU, before the superintendent search begins.

Sabrina Harris noted a committee has already been formed to begin the superintendent search. Mr. Richardson explained the state-mandated process to break away from or join another SAU

50 is a two-year process. Ms. Swanson suggested it would be wise to begin gathering financial in-
52 formation to make an informed decision in the future.

54 Mr. Richardson explained they look at surrounding communities when determining wages, as
56 those are the towns Chester will be competing with to hire employees. When considering an
58 SAU, it is difficult to find a community locally with the same student makeup as Chester. Ms.
Harris said Chester follows specific standards to provide an adequate education level, which do
not change based on the taxpayer makeup. She stressed this is a challenge for Chester and re-
quires an adequate administration and SAU.

60 Ms. Harris noted for perspective, they are debating a \$47,000 line item in a \$1.3 million budget
62 increase. Chair Dobbins asked to see the fully loaded cost, which includes retirement and bene-
fits. Mr. Richardson pointed out there is a breakout of staff costs in the budget.

64 Chair Dobbins asked for clarification on the health care premium increase and the difference
66 between regular and special education staff. Dr. Locke explained this is dependent on what the
68 staff members elect. Mr. Richardson noted the demographic in the School's workforce has
changed, with senior teachers not moving across the steps at the same level as new teachers,
which impacts salaries and insurance plans.

70 Chair Dobbins said the contractual increases seem disproportional, outside of the teaching staff.
72 Mr. Richardson explained administrative increases are included and the CEA represents other
functions for the School, such as nurses.

74 Dr. Locke shared the updated per-pupil costs from the Department of Education for elementary
76 and middle-school students. She noted that Chester does a very good job of delivering value for
the dollar and is among the lowest in per-pupil expenditure compared to area towns.

78 Mr. Kilar reviewed the Warrant Articles that have a cost component.

80 Warrant Article 5 is to replace the flat roof. A capital reserve fund was established to offset the
82 cost of this. This Article proposes to expend the fund and raise approximately \$30,000. The to-
tal expense should be approximately \$259,000, although this will go out to bid. The work will
be done during the summer of 2024.

84 Warrant Article 6 is to cover some of the prep work required to replace the playground, at a cost
86 of \$149,300. This includes moving the athletic shed, moving the dumpsters, and demolishing
and reconstructing the maintenance garage, which is in disrepair. This will open up lines of
88 sight to the playground. Ms. Guilmette questioned the cost associated with the maintenance gar-
age and Dr. Locke reviewed the quotes received for a metal versus stick-built structure. Mr.
90 Richardson noted the building is over capacity and needs to be enlarged. He also explained
there is a committee conducting fundraising activities to replace most of the playground equip-
92 ment. Mr. Kilar noted this work will go out to bid as well.

94 Ms. Guilmette asked if sufficient funds are being put aside to replace the boilers and the Board
96 discussed this. Mr. Kilar said they doubled the request for the boiler capital reserve fund from
\$20,000 to \$40,000, in light of the revised estimate.

The Board discussed the order in which the Warrant Articles are being presented and the importance of funding the boiler replacement over the playground. Ms. Harris said they will take this back to the CSB for discussion.

Chair Dobbins asked how much of the recommended budget is driven by statutory and contractual obligations. Dr. Locke explained that aside from a few salaries that were added to the budget (a portion of the superintendent's salary and the mental health clinician), increases that are largely outside the School's control overexplain the entire increase.

Dr. Locke reviewed the increase in speech services, which was due to a recategorization. The Board discussed the reasons for the increase in course reimbursement. Ms. Guilmette asked about the increase in contracted services, which Dr. Locke explained is for a project manager to oversee the construction projects and upgrades. If these projects are not approved, this position will not be needed. The CSB will explore attaching this position to the Warrant Articles.

VII. Minutes

a. December 11, 2023

Ms. Guilmette moved to approve the minutes from December 11, 2023, as written. Ms. Harris seconded the motion. A vote was taken. All were in favor except Mr. Varsalone, who abstained. The motion passed 5-0-1.

VIII. Next Meeting Date

The next meeting will be held on January 15, 2024.

IX. Adjourn

Ms. Guilmette moved to adjourn the meeting. Ms. Harris seconded the motion. A vote was taken, all were in favor. The motion passed unanimously.

Respectfully submitted,
Beth Hanggeli, Recording Secretary